Case Study: Creating FEMA Corps

A template for developing the U.S. Public Health Jobs Corps

Executive Summary

The U.S. Public Health Jobs Corps must quickly mobilize to provide culturally competent, community-centric assistance to Americans caught in the COVID-19 crisis. The U.S. Public Health Jobs Corps can build on the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Corps’ successes and lessons learned to put Americans to work in partnership with state, tribal, and local leaders, nonprofits, academia, and the private sector. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the FEMA Corps model is a proven, scalable, whole-of-community approach to meeting every community’s needs across America.

Launched in 2012 by FEMA and the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), FEMA Corps is a 12-month residential emergency management service program for 18-24 year-olds. FEMA Corps developed from former Deputy Administrator Richard Serino’s realization that FEMA’s workforce was too small, did not represent the communities it served, and did not prioritize disaster survivors’ needs.

FEMA Corps was created in under a year as an affordable way to expand and diversify FEMA’s workforce rapidly. FEMA Corps members are trained to perform essential roles in support of the FEMA mission, and then they are deployed in teams of peers from across the U.S. to communities in need to complete projects related to disaster preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery. FEMA Corps enables young professionals to contribute to Whole-of-America response efforts, creating opportunities to serve their country while also advancing their careers. Corps members are energetic, agile force-multipliers and bring a fresh perspective that helps FEMA innovate to better meet communities’ needs.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations for the U.S. Public Health Job Corps

Per Executive Order 13996 section 4(d), the U.S. Public Health Job Corps, “…shall be modeled on or developed as a component of the FEMA Corps program.” The U.S. Public Health Jobs Corps is a bold opportunity to respond to an unprecedented disaster while simultaneously creating jobs, expanding national volunteerism, accelerating leadership development, and establishing a diverse talent pipeline into public service positions. Like FEMA Corps members, the 100,000+ U.S. Public Health Jobs Corps members should come from the communities they serve so that they can inform and implement culturally competent approaches to protecting at-risk populations. The Corps should include four branches:

1. a branch for young people to commit a year to national service, following the best practices of FEMA Corps;
2. a branch for paid workers (e.g., contact tracers, community health workers) following the best practices of the Resilience Force;

3. a branch for paid, licensed professionals, following the best practices of the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps; and,

4. a branch for emerging public sector leaders, following the best practices of the Reserve Officer Training Corps.

To succeed, the U.S. Public Health Job Corps should capitalize on the lessons learned from FEMA Corps’ development, including:

- **Create infrastructure dedicated to the Corps’ success** (e.g., an office within the Office of the Secretary of Health and Human Services, Labor, Homeland Security, or Education with a dedicated assistant secretary position) given the unparalleled size of the Corps and conduct ongoing change management to gain the support of the existing workforce.

- **Articulate a clear vision and purpose statement for the Corps** that can be rallied behind and returned to as common ground during negotiations.

- **Prioritize building relationships, trust, and situational awareness across government stakeholders** with equities in the Corps (i.e., the Domestic Policy Council, House and Senate Appropriations Committees, Office of Management and Budget) – identify who must be bought-in, consulted, or informed – and create a culture where the expectation is finding solutions and getting to “yes” rather than just identifying risks and roadblocks.

- **Build partnerships with community stakeholders and involve them in the Corps development process** to ensure that the Corps addresses their needs – continuously solicit and respond to feedback from stakeholders of all levels.

- **Leverage the expertise of organizations like Resilience Force and City Year** and build on their best practices, such as creating avenues for private firms to donate supplies to outfit and equip Corps members.

- **Provide Corps members with opportunities to advance their careers** with training in leadership, public service, and networking so that the Corps becomes a resource for recruiting talented, committed people into government service.

Just as Americans counted on FEMA Corps to help them through Hurricane Sandy, the Flint water crisis, and Hurricane Maria, Americans are counting on the U.S. Public Health Job Corps to help them through the COVID-19 pandemic. FEMA Corps demonstrated that with hard work, many forms of leadership, vision, and common sense, the Federal government can quickly innovate to meet communities’ needs. Building on this trusted experience, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Labor, the Department of Education, and CNCS must take the decisive steps necessary to create the U.S. Public Health Job Corps to get COVID-19 under control and deliver immediate relief to Americans nationwide.
Case Study: Creating FEMA Corps

Richard Serino, who served as the Deputy Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) under the Obama administration, remembers stepping out of a black government SUV and watching ash puff into a small grey cloud around his feet.

“I was in Bastrop, Texas right after the September 2011 urban wildfires. I was walking through one neighborhood and everything was burned out. I was walking through nothing: literally, the ashes were all that was left of homes. It was total devastation.” Serino continued, “I had responded to countless house fires in Boston with Boston Emergency Medical Services (EMS), and there is a certain smell that you never forget. That day, with the smell and the soot and walking through ash and having the ash float up with every step you take…it triggered a lot of powerful memories.”

“They had just cleared this little area for survivors to come back to survey the damage. I watched as people saw, for the first time, that nothing was left of their homes. What struck me most that day is how resilient people are. They would say, ‘We’re just thankful that no one died. We’re okay. We’re going to rebuild. Go help someone else.’ It just amazed me, and I thought to myself, ‘How can we better help these people?’” Serino remembered.

“After speaking with survivors in the neighborhood, we went to a Disaster Recovery Center (DRC) to speak with survivors there. I wanted to hear what they were going through and what their needs were.

Driving up, I remember registering what an old, beat-up building it was – not very friendly. There were a few families inside just looking for help. They didn’t have insurance and they didn’t know how to apply for assistance. I tried to get a sense of whether they were planning to rebuild, and I told them about services that were available to them to help bring some normalcy back into their lives. Always, I was trying to give them hope. I would give them an opportunity to talk, and I would truly listen. After speaking with someone for five minutes, you get a good sense of what their real needs are.”

“The challenge I saw was that our DRCs were not survivor-centric. The paid volunteers, known as Reservists, who staffed the DRCs – many of whom were retirees – were very nice, but they lacked energy and compassion. They would say to survivors, ‘You have to do X, then Y, and then Z,’ rather than saying, ‘I’ll do X, Y, and Z with you or for you.’ The DRCs weren’t focused on customer service; we expected survivors to know things and know what to ask for. Survivors would be asked, ‘Why didn’t you fill out this form?’ Well, how were they supposed to know there was a form to complete?” asked Serino.

“After speaking with a few families, I walked into another room in the DRC and ran into two young AmeriCorps members. They were working with the Forestry Corps, and they were so into it and had so much energy. I sat down with them and we talked for over an hour about what they were doing to help the community. They were passionate about their mission; they cared so much and were so dedicated to making a difference. In real time, I was contrasting their energy and presence to that of the FEMA volunteers in the next room who cared but were less driven.”
“I left my conversation with those two AmeriCorps members feeling energized and thinking, ‘FEMA could do this.’ I knew we could do something similar to what AmeriCorps was doing to better serve survivors,” said Serino.

**FEMA Background**

President Jimmy Carter signed an executive order to merge multiple disaster preparedness and response organizations across the Federal government into a single Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) on April 1, 1979. On March 1, 2003, FEMA and 22 other Federal agencies became a part of the newly formed Department of Homeland Security (DHS) that was created in response to the September 11, 2001 terror attacks.

FEMA’s mission is, “Helping people before, during, and after disasters.” FEMA, “…coordinates the federal government’s role in preparing for, preventing, mitigating the effects of, responding to, and recovering from all domestic disasters, whether natural or man-made, including acts of terror.” To achieve its mission, in 2008, just before Serino joined the Agency, FEMA had 2,964 permanent fulltime employees (PFTs), 5,342 Cadre of On-Call Response/Recovery Employees (COREs), and 8,622 Disaster Assistance Employees (DAEs). COREs and DAEs augment the Agency’s PFTs to meet the needs of disaster survivors.

**Serino Joins FEMA**

*Meeting Administrator Craig Fugate*

Serino and Fugate met for the first time in Washington, DC while Serino was going through the Senate confirmation process to become FEMA’s Deputy Administrator. Fugate had just been confirmed as the Administrator. Style-wise, it was immediately clear that Serino and Fugate were yin and yang.

Serino and Fugate were sitting in a conference room between what would become their two offices in FEMA Headquarters. “I looked at Craig and said, ‘If I get confirmed, I understand that this will be my office. I don't plan on spending more than 50 percent of my time in there – I want to spend my time in the regions and in the field with people on the ground. And I plan on spending my weekends back at home in Boston unless something is going on,’” Serino remembered. “Craig nodded and said, ‘Good.’”

Serino and Fugate have different, complementary personalities and backgrounds. Both have local-level experience as paramedics and in emergency management, but Fugate has more state-level experience from his time working in emergency management in Florida, and Serio has Federal interagency experience from his work on the Pandemic and All-Hazards Preparedness Act (Public Law No. 109-417).

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
Brad Kieserman, who served as FEMA’s Chief Counsel under Fugate and Serino, remembered Fugate as a visionary, “Craig was laser-focused on issues that he believed were critical to successful response. He didn’t allow himself or his team to be distracted and he didn’t hold any punches – he valued results. Craig viewed his role as providing vision and strategically leading the emergency management community— he understood his role was to be a leader, not a manager.”

Kieserman remembered Serino, on the other hand, as a politically savvy operator, “Rich understands relationships and has a broad network – he knows everyone – which allowed him to take on management of the Agency.”

Bill Carwile, who served as the Associate Administrator for Response and Recovery under Fugate and Serino, agreed, “Craig had a vision and left his senior leadership team to act on it. Coming from the response community, we all had a sense of urgency about getting things done.”

**Becoming the Chief Operating Officer (COO)**

Serino was sworn in as FEMA’s Deputy administrator on October 19, 2009. Throughout the confirmation process, Serino was read-in about the breadth of FEMA as an organization but was not told specifics about the Deputy Administrator position. He imagined that he was going to join FEMA as the “disaster guy” heavily involved with responses around the country. Upon being confirmed, however, Serino quickly learned that the real responsibility of the Deputy Administrator position was that of being the Agency’s COO. It was challenging to get a grasp of the full scope of FEMA’s operations.

“For a while, almost every day I would say, ‘We do this, too?’” remembered Serino.

“Administratively, FEMA was a mess,” remembered Carwile. “FEMA had gotten beaten down onto its knees because of Hurricane Katrina and years of mismanagement in terms of human resources and funding. After Katrina, Congress threw tons of money at FEMA in an effort to make it well. Rich inherited a huge deficit, to a degree – the Agency had tons of contracts, big bonuses…Rich dove into making FEMA well financially and administratively.”

“I’ll remember Rich for putting the ‘M’ back in FEMA,” said Fugate.

**Reexamining the FEMA Workforce**

In March 2010, Serino visited a Joint Field Office set up to coordinate the Agency’s response to flooding in Tennessee. Serino spoke with several Reservists who, at the time, were known as DAEs.

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1 Kieserman, FEMA Corps Interview. All quotes from Kieserman were gathered during this interview.
2 Carwile, FEMA Corps Interview. All quotes from Carwile were gathered during this interview.
3 Federal Emergency Management Agency, “Richard Serino Sworn In As FEMA Deputy Administrator.”
4 Fugate, FEMA Corps Interview. All quotes from Fugate were gathered during this interview.
Serino was shocked by what he learned about the DAEs’ work. DAEs were often retirees who relied on their income from FEMA. When called upon to serve, some DAEs would decide whether to respond to the disaster based on if they would be able to stay in a hotel that aligned with their personal point loyalty program. When deployed, each DAE was issued their own rental car with which to travel from the hotel to the Joint Field Office – there was no expectation of carpooling. DAEs received free breakfasts and dinners, as well as free alcohol at certain hotels in the evenings. Serino learned that it was common for DAEs to work 16 hours a day, seven days a week, receiving eight hours of regular pay and eight hours of overtime pay, as well as overtime pay for all hours worked on weekends. The DAEs would assess damage in the community with clipboards and paper during the day and then slowly enter the data they had collected into Excel spreadsheets at night.

“The incentives were all wrong,” said Serino. “The slower they worked, the longer they were deployed and the more overtime they got. There was incredible budget bloat. What’s worse, FEMA did not have a training and certification process for DAEs, so many were not up to date on the latest FEMA policies and would give survivors incorrect information. The answer they always jumped to was, ‘No.’”

Professionalizing and Diversifying the Workforce

Bob Fenton, who served as the Acting Deputy Assistant Administrator for Response, remembered that there was a real push from Fugate and Serino to reexamine and professionalize the emergency management workforce. “They wanted to improve credentialing and training, as well as the demographic makeup of the workforce,” Fenton recalled.

Fugate and Serino wanted to create a pipeline for new talent to join FEMA, as well as educate young professionals on emergency management as a potential career. “We saw a number of opportunities in developing a channel for young people to get hands-on experience with emergency management, supplement the FEMA workforce, and provide openings for younger and more diverse candidates to enter the profession,” reflected Kieserman. “Craig used to say, ‘FEMA is not for everyone.’ He wanted young people to have the chance to learn about emergency management and spread awareness of what they had learned wherever they go: their place of business, their friends, their community…this could be one of the best ways to expand preparedness across the nation.”

“FEMA had invested a lot in academic institutions to develop emergency management degrees. We wanted to create some kind of professional development track and expose people to emergency management, as well as tie emergency management to service,” added Fenton. “There was a proliferation of emergency management post-graduate programs, but lots of programs were not recruiting and training people who were not already working in emergency management. There were not a lot of entry-level opportunities,” remembered Kieserman. “The average age of emergency managers at that point was well over 40.”

“There were also concerns about the lack of women and minorities in emergency management at all levels of government,” said Carwile. “How do you diversify a workforce that is limited in its diversity and experiences?” Fugate remembered wondering.

12 Fenton, FEMA Corps Interviews. All quotes from Fenton were gathered during these interviews.
Maxus Maxus – What would we do?

Fugate pressed his leadership team to think about how the Agency would withstand the worst-case scenario: “He would ask us, ‘What would we do if all of the worst disasters happened simultaneously? How would we organize? What resources would we need? How would we manage over time?’” recalled Carwile.

“We never felt that there were enough folks available,” said Alex Amparo, who served as Fugate and Serino’s Deputy Assistant Administrator for Recovery.

“Craig wanted an expeditionary organization,” remembered Fenton. “He wanted everyone at FEMA to be an emergency manager and be able to work in a disaster environment. It was Rich’s job, then, to be a change management person and develop an organization where we can develop future emergency managers and work in a disaster environment.”

Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS)

CNCS is a small, independent Federal agency with the mission to, “…improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering.”

CNCS and its three flagship programs (Senior Corps, AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC), and Learn and Serve America) were established in 1993 by Congress and the Clinton Administration. In 2009, Congress and President Obama reauthorized and expanded CNCS’ programming to make, “…America stronger by focusing service on key national issues; by expanding opportunities to serve; by building the capacity of individuals, nonprofits, and communities; and by encouraging innovative approaches to solving problems.” However, in September 2011, the House Labor, Health and Human Services 2012 appropriations bill sought to cut funding to CNCS by $800 million and require the “‘orderly elimination’” of AmeriCorps NCCC and other programs.

18 Years of Partnership

“FEMA and CNCS have had a strong partnership and collaboration since 1994,” explained Kelly DeGraff, who served as the Director of Disaster Service and as a Senior Advisor to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of CNCS. Literature on the CNCS website further explains that, “CNCS, through the Disaster Services Unit (DSU), supports community-based nonprofits, educational institutions, faith-based organizations, and other groups by coordinating volunteers, serving meals and collecting food donations, conducting damage assessments, making home repairs, cleaning up environmental areas, removing debris, and connecting victims to social services.”

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13 Amparo, FEMA Corps Interview. All quotes from Amparo were gathered during this interview.
14 Corporation for National and Community Service, “About CNCS.”
16 Corporation for National and Community Service, “Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act.”
17 Simpson, “Appropriations Bill Threatens AmeriCorps Funding.”
18 DeGraff, FEMA Corps Interview. All quotes from DeGraff were gathered during this interview.
19 Corporation for National and Community Service, “Preparing Communities, Responding to Disasters.”
Between 1994 and 2005, CNCS volunteers responded to the numerous natural disasters, as well as to the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing and the September 11th terrorist attacks. In 2005, CNCS contributed over $200 million of resources to help communities recover from Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma.

“Two years post-Katrina up until the BP oil spill, there was no disaster of catastrophic level, so CNCS started to disengage from disaster services because there wasn't a lot of activity,” recalled DeGraff. “Our partnerships with other Federal organizations became weaker, but then the oil spill happened and the White House and others looked to CNCS to lead volunteer management.”

CNCS looked to DeGraff to lead the Corporation’s efforts. “I was a new leader and nascent to working side-by-side with senior leaders,” she said.

“CNCS was focused on building state and local capacity during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010, working closely with White House, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Coast Guard, and FEMA. I worked, with my team, to rebuild relationships and trust that had been untended particularly with FEMA,” said DeGraff. CNCS deployed over 5,000 volunteers to help with shore cleanup and case management; and over 200 AmeriCorps NCCC members supported affected communities, “…with volunteer management, food shelter, case management, and other nonprofit and faith-based organization support.”

“Our involvement generated lots of momentum for more collaboration with FEMA,” DeGraff reflected.

“The new administration in the White House was eager to use its agencies and have a strong impact. But – at the same time – we were in a period of transition internally: we had an Acting CEO, who had been acting for a little more than two years; our chief of staff was brand new; and other senior leaders were also in acting positions. With people in acting positions, the goal was to hold the status quo and not make any major changes,” remembered DeGraff.

Connections from Volunteer Florida

Before joining FEMA, Amparo had served as the Commissioner for Volunteer Florida, the Florida Governor's Commission on Volunteerism and Community Service, overseeing the state’s grants from CNCS.

“We worked with AmeriCorps NCCC members and state-level grantees to get them to participate outside of their normal mission areas to help respond to hurricanes and tornados,” Amparo explained. “For example, we had volunteers leading a reading program in Florida schools, which became shelters: the question was, ‘How do we get those volunteers to continue their service when their community needs them the most?’”

He continued, “We accepted that emergency management as a profession would always have an outpouring of support, which we should account for during disaster operations. We built service opportunities where they were most needed and saw early examples of AmeriCorps NCCC members being involved in disaster response. These were some impactful service opportunities that these young people had at a very formative time in their life.”

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20 Corporation for National and Community Service, “AmeriCorps 20th Anniversary Disaster Services Toolkit.”
21 Ibid.
22 Corporation for National and Community Service, “Preparing Communities, Responding to Disasters.”
23 Corporation for National and Community Service, “AmeriCorps 20th Anniversary Disaster Services Toolkit.”
2011 – A Record-Breaking Year

2011 was one of FEMA’s busiest years on record: the Agency responded to 242 disasters (a normal year usually saw around 100 disasters), and 16 of those disasters cost over a billion dollars each.24

**Joplin Tornado – May 2011**

The tornado that struck Joplin, Missouri on May 22, 2011 killed 160 people, damaged or destroyed 7,500 residences and 500 businesses, and displaced 9,200 people.26

350 AmeriCorps members deployed to support the disaster response, “These members leveraged, coordinated and documented more than 75,000 volunteers contributing over 500,000 hours of service to Joplin…..AmeriCorps members were instrumental to mobilizing this influx of volunteers and donations, which saved the city more than $17.7 million in disaster costs.”27

Serino flew to Joplin to support the response. He was impressed by the AmeriCorps members’ work and remembered thinking, “If AmeriCorps members can manage over 70,000 volunteers, they can have a huge impact on how we respond to disasters.”

Shortly after, while home for a weekend in Boston, Serino visited City Year to learn about their experience developing a service corps of young people. “City Year was the birthplace of AmeriCorps,” explained Serino. “The Mayor of Boston uses City Year for a lot of things, and my daughter did a summer with an offshoot of City Year that teaches kids in urban areas – I had a soft spot for them anyway.”

“I called them up, said who I was, and asked if I could come visit to learn how they started, what they do, how they manage funding, and so on,” said Serino. “I spent two mornings there speaking with their founders and learning what they do and how they do it. I heard how they figured out how to use young people to do good in communities and that they had restrictions on their mission based on the colors of their funding.”

**Hurricane Irene – August 2011**

A few months later, Fugate, Serino, Fenton, Kieserman, and other were sitting in the M1 room of FEMA Headquarters in DC. Hurricane Irene had just struck.

“We were running out of people,” Kieserman remembered. “There was a big PowerPoint slide up on the screen…very rarely did I see Craig Fugate get angry, but he got pretty angry because it took us all by surprise. We had so many people deployed that if we had one more incident, we weren’t going to have enough people left. Imagine if that hadn’t been Hurricane Irene but had been Hurricane Maria or Irma or Harvey…It became clear that we needed to build additional capacity.”

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24 Federal Emergency Management Agency, “Disaster Declarations by Year.”
26 Hassan, Karimi, and Ellis, “Joplin, Missouri, Tornado.”
27 Corporation for National and Community Service, “AmeriCorps 20th Anniversary Disaster Services Toolkit.”
Added Serino, “In emergency management, you always want to keep a third of your workforce back in case something else hits. When we got to Hurricane Irene, we were already pulling from that last third of people. On top of that, we had Reservists in that last third who were not willing to deploy. The issue with the DAE/Reservist model is that you can’t mandate that they deploy. If you want to be able to require them to go, like the National Guard model, you have to provide better benefits. That’s why we developed the CORE model and why we were continuing to look at redesigning the workforce.”

**Bastrop Wildfires – September 2011**

Four weeks later, Serino and Carwile were visiting the FEMA DRC for Bastrop, Texas wildfire survivors and speaking with the two AmeriCorps NCCC members working with the Forestry Corps about their efforts and other ways AmeriCorps NCCC members could support disaster response.

“Upon Rich returning from a disaster in Texas he asked me to look into AmeriCorps; he gave me this idea to look into,” remembered Fenton.

**“Not a Straight Line from A to B”**

“Rich didn’t really know what he wanted, at first,” reflected Fenton. “It was not a straight line from A to B. We had been engaging in listening sessions and discussions for months about how to get youth engaged, how to better recruit diverse candidates, what are our hiring authorities were…over time – with lots of inputs and recommendations – we recognized that it made the most sense for us to pursue multiple options to improve our overall workforce.”

“Title 5 hiring authority was primarily used for our full-time workforce and did not provide the flexibility to meet the dynamic requirements caused by disasters. Additionally, many mid-level emergency managers from the FEMA Reserve workforce were unable to qualify. It was apparent that we needed to find a turnkey workforce with existing authorities and a pathway to ‘get status.’

We started exploring many different programs like the Peace Corps, the AmeriCorps Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) program, and AmeriCorps NCCC. I started reaching out to leaders of these programs and having discussions,” said Fenton.

“I met with Bob and Alex one day and asked me to tell them everything about CNCS’ programs,” remembered DeGraff. “They shared that they had identified some funds and that Rich and Craig to explore how they could diversify emergency management in terms of gender, age, race, and religion. They knew that CNCS prides itself on having a very diverse culture. I recall them saying, ‘We have this mission and we have money - how can we do it with your organization?’”

“This was an opportunity to scale what was being done at the Florida state level to help respond to the hundred plus disasters that were happening every year,” said Amparo. Added Serino, “This was a chance to create another national service opportunity for young people who did not want to join the military, which is something I started thinking about during my meetings with City Year.”

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28 “Status” here refers to “noncompetitive eligibility hiring status,” which would allow FEMA Corps members to apply for positions within FEMA after graduation that are only open to Federal employees, not to members of the general public. (Reference: “Noncompetitive Eligibility.”)
“We learned that AmeriCorps NCCC did not provide status, but the program attracted a diverse workforce of individuals committed to service and at the beginning of their careers (it’s comprised of mostly 18-24-year-olds). And AmeriCorps members served at a fraction of the cost of existing disaster employees. It would be a great way to get people at the beginning of their career and be able to train and educate them as emergency managers,” Fenton said.

“AmeriCorps NCCC made sense because it's the only program that CNCS directly managed and implements as a government agency, and we already had infrastructure in place,” added DeGraff.

DeGraff, Fenton, and Amparo continued to meet. “Rich came into some of those early conversations, too, and he was quite a force. I felt a little intimidated. I was new at working at this level with people that I always saw as being five or six levels above me, and now I was at the table with them. Rich being Rich, there was absolutely no reason to be intimidated. When he came into those conversations, he was able to provide encouragement and would say, ‘Let’s get this done - there’s nothing stopping us, there’s nothing we can’t do if we think innovatively and creatively.’ He was a cheerleader, but it was more than that: he really had confidence in what we were doing,” remembered DeGraff.

**Meeting with CNCS Leadership**

“I then had to go back to my leadership,” remembered DeGraff. “I knew I wasn’t holding the status quo, but I also knew from my conversations with FEMA that there were time restrictions because of the budget cycle. I wrote a memo on October 20, 2011 to CNCS’ Acting CEO and three other CNCS leaders about FEMA’s interest in expanding the partnership and explaining that Rich wanted to meet. I included Rich’s bio on the back because CNCS leadership hadn’t met Rich yet because everything was in transition.”

“After writing the memo, I scheduled a meeting with CNCS executive leadership and directors of the various AmeriCorps programs,” shared DeGraff. “I expected to be met with a lot of resistance, but I wasn’t: there was some trepidation and hesitation of making monumental decisions while serving in acting roles. There was a lot of internal debate going on inside CNCS about how involved in disasters the Agency should be or if CNCS should focus on other issues. My colleagues and I were able to demonstrate that all of the other issues people wanted to focus on, like food insecurity, housing, job loss, are all a part of disaster recovery. We had to do a lot of internal work to get buy-in from our colleagues about the idea of an expanded partnership with FEMA. There were countless nights where a group of us were in the office until one or two o’clock in the morning working on presentations to give to our colleagues to help them see them possibilities. Two of my colleagues had worked on the Obama campaign and were connected to the Administration and the First Lady; we leveraged those connections to help influence CNCS internally.”

“CNCS was interested but wary because they didn’t understand FEMA’s agenda,” remembered Kieserman. “They wanted to maintain the integrity of the various corps they had and ensure they could provide meaningful experiences with clear outcomes for people in them and the communities they served.”
Meeting with President Obama – November 2011

As 2011 drew to a close, Serino was invited to an evening meeting at the White House for Federal agency undersecretaries to share ideas about innovation. Serino planned to observe and listen, but he sketched some discussion points and quick calculations of the savings a FEMA service corps could generate, just in case.

“The meeting was led by White House Chief of Staff Michael Daley and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Acting Director Jeffrey Zients. It took place in the Roosevelt Room and began with introductions around the table, which evolved into talking politics of the day, not really sharing ideas. Then a woman in the back of the room called out, ‘You were all supposed to come here with a new idea, no one has said a new idea yet,’” Serino remembered.

“A few people shared ideas that fell flat, and then it was my turn. I shared my observations of AmeriCorps members during the Joplin and Bastrop responses. I was brainstorming out-loud what a youth-based volunteer service for FEMA could look like based on all of the conversations we had had,” recalled Serino. “I pulled out the rough calculations I had done on a piece of scrap paper: I estimated – by comparing the $34,000 annual fixed cost of AmeriCorps and City Year corps members to the variable costs of Reservists with all of their overtime, hotels, rental cars, per diem, administrative overhead, and so on – that this type of program with 1,600 corps members could save FEMA $50 million annually.” Serino added as an aside, “Ultimately, when we actually ran the numbers with FEMA’s Chief Financial Officer, the program generated $60 million in savings, but – during that meeting at the White House – I estimated $50 million. I was pretty close!”

“The Chief of Staff and OMB Director seemed to be impressed by the idea, and then the President walked into the room and thanked everyone for attending and for their service. When he saw me he said, ‘Oh – you! I only see you when bad things are happening!’” Serino laughed.

“The Chief of Staff and OMB Director encouraged me to share the FEMA Corps idea with the President. I had briefed the President during previous disaster responses and preparedness exercises, so I knew how to present the idea in a way that would resonate. He listened carefully, nodding, and said that he really liked the idea,” Serino remembered.

“When the meeting was over, the President invited everyone across the hall to take a picture in the Oval Office. While everyone was making their way over, the President came up to me and asked to hear more about FEMA Corps. I shared some back-of-a-napkin estimates for potential cost-savings FEMA Corps could generate and reiterated how developing the next generation of responders could positively impact both FEMA and local communities. The President seemed excited,” recalled Serino.

“As I was leaving the Oval Office, one of the President’s staffers came up to me and asked for a white paper on FEMA Corps. I told them, truthfully, that we had been too busy to develop one and that I would get back to them.”

“I knew how quickly news could spread in Washington – I knew I needed to brief my bosses as soon as possible so that they wouldn’t be caught off-guard. I waked into Craig’s office the next morning and said, ‘Boss, I have to tell you what happened at the White House last night.’ I told him about the meeting and the FEMA Corps idea, and Craig asked, ‘Did the boss like it?’ referring to the President, and I said, ‘Yes.’ He said, ‘Okay.’ And that was that,” Serino chuckled.
Fugate added, “The President’s focus on community service is what got him excited about the idea. This was what the President was looking for.”

Next, Serino attended his regular weekly meeting with the DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano. “Going into the meeting, I knew I had to get her buy-in. I approached her at the end of the meeting and shared the events of the past 24 hours. I explained how FEMA Corps could be a part of her legacy. She approved but told me that FEMA Corps was mine, for better or worse.”

**Creating a Business Case and an Interagency Agreement**

A few days later, Serino met with Richard Reed, who served as Special Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Senior Director for Resilience Policy on the National Security Council. “I knew him from before I came to DC,” said Serino. “We also talked almost daily because he was FEMA’s point-person at the White House: we worked together on a lot of things. When he spoke, he spoke for the President.”

Serino shared the idea of a youth-based volunteer service for FEMA with Reed. “We had a good, longstanding relationship – I didn’t have to sell him on anything. When I told him the idea and asked him what he thought, and he said, ‘Yeah, sounds good.’ He influenced the President heavily and made sure we had support.”

“The National Security staff at the White House called CNCS staff to say that the President was interested in a FEMA-CNCS collaboration,” said Kieserman.

“Now, with the President’s sign-off, we actually had to figure out what we were going to do,” remembered DeGraff. “We had so much buy-in by then, all of the program leads wanted their program to be the pilot. The first thing we had to do was develop a business case and an interagency agreement. We started drafting on December 5, 2011.”

Amparo recalled, “Rich was constantly asking, ‘Where are we? We need to move forward.’ He was relentlessness about saying that we were going to do this.”

“Richie gets very persistent when he gets an idea,” chuckled Fugate. “He was persistent to overcome the inertia of the bureaucracy to not do anything risky. Bureaucracies hate change and they hate risk. FEMA Corps was risky: a lot of things could go wrong.”

“There was no changing his mind. Many times, programs like FEMA Corps are killed because people are reluctant: Rich drove a sense of urgency that made it happen,” added Amparo.

“Craig used to say, ‘This is not just a bumper sticker. We need to accomplish this,’” recalled Fenton. “Rich was one hundred percent supported by Craig. Craig said, ‘Bring me the outcome,’ and allowed Rich to drive,” agreed Amparo.

“Rich didn't have all of the answers – he knew there were a lot of issues – but he also knew that we were going to have this program. He would say, ‘Don't bring me reasons why not, tell me what we can do,’” Amparo said. “He wouldn’t accept ‘no’ as an answer – he would tell you to go back and find the answer,” agreed Fugate.
Serino remembered setting the tone, “Brad Kieserman approached Craig and I during our confirmation process. At the time, he was the Assistant Counsel at DHS. He said, ‘You know, FEMA Administrators have a lot more authority than people think.’ The previous administration’s lawyers were focused on saying, ‘No.’ Brad was focused on saying, ‘Yes’ – bringing him on was one of the keys to transforming FEMA.” Serino laughed, “Brad’s job was to keep me and Craig out of jail!”

Kieserman explained, “Finding legal solutions is all about how you structure interactions. Unless something is criminal, you can probably find a solution. I worked at the Coast Guard as an operator, and then they sent me to law school. I managed operations, I didn’t work in contracts or stand in a courtroom. All I did, from the time I was 22-years-old on, was solve problems in the middle of crisis. I thought being creative and finding solutions as a lawyer is what everybody did.”

“When I got to FEMA as Chief Counsel, the lawyers at FEMA were not beloved. We sent a survey to all of the senior executives saying, ‘We want to make a better law firm for you – tell us what’s important to you.’ The senior executives responded that they wanted four basic qualities in their lawyers: people who were solution-oriented; had excellent written and oral communication and could make the law understandable; gave legally sufficient advice – FEMA lawyers were perceived to go into meetings and give policy advice rather than present all of the legal options available –; and timely,” remembered Kieserman.

“This became our practice philosophy: solution-oriented, articulate, legally sufficient, and timely – we called it ‘SALT’ and provided training to all of our lawyers. We could hold each other accountable to being SALTy – we would give out awards to the SALTiest lawyers. Senior executives could also hold their lawyers accountable – it created a common ground across the organization. This is the philosophy that governed our negotiations about FEMA Corps – it was all about finding a solution,” Kieserman explained.

“If the team wanted to slow roll and prevent FEMA Corps from happening, they could have. There wasn't passive aggressiveness – most folks seemed inclined to help get things done rather than coming up with reasons not to do it. I really think it was Richie's enthusiasm and the President’s support that got people at least initially invested,” reflected Fugate.

“Looking back on my career, it’s never been as good as it was then,” said Kieserman. “We just gelled. The dynamic was, ‘There was no problem that could be put in front of us that we couldn’t solve if there was an objective that we were trying to meet.’ We didn't put problems in front of each other that we didn't have solutions for. It was truly collaborative. It wasn’t warm and fuzzy – we were objective driven – and Richie is warm and fuzzy until he's not. There were spirited discussions, but we believed in and stuck to the priorities we had set for FEMA.”

“My biggest lesson learned coming out of that period of my professional life is that, if you trust the people you work with and you all can agree on goals and objectives, then all of the normal office politics go away. And if those politics go away, then you can fill that space with achievement. It felt like a true team. Everybody had each other's back,” said Kieserman.
“I attribute my belief in the mission of creating the program back to Rich,” said DeGraff. “Rich is very astute and he recognized that I was a new leader, but he never made me feel anything less than equal. Because I had people like Rich around me, I was able to build my confidence. This is something Rich instilled in his staff: If I felt unsure of being at the table, Rich' staff assured me otherwise – they never questioned why they were working with me; they treated me with respect. There are many times that people become who you expect them to be – FEMA and Rich expected me to be solid and genuine, and that's what I gave them.”

“We were all serious about producing a meaningful experience that would help young people make a decision about the emergency management profession. There were competing views about how to do that, but when things got bumpy, we would come back to that mutual goal,” remembered Kieserman. “People were excited because they could see what the future could look like.”

“The going-in position from the FEMA side was that we were all emergency managers – we were used to and wanted to have oversight and control of everything because that was the best way we could manage,” explained Amparo. “There were FEMA people who agreed with leveraging AmeriCorps NCCC ideas but wanted to build FEMA Corps in-house,” recalled Fenton.

“I knew it was critical that we partner with AmeriCorps NCCC,” said Serino. “We were trying to address an issue of diversity in our workforce: if we built the program in-house, we would have continued to bring in the same types of people with the same backgrounds, perspectives, and preconceived notions about emergency management. We needed to work with AmeriCorps NCCC to get that diversity and fresh ideas.”

“From CNCS, they felt they had a program identity that FEMA was trying to take from them. They liked the FEMA Corps idea and thought it could help them, but they had spent a lot of time building their brand. CNCS was trying to maintain 30 plus years of branding that they had built and not lose that while FEMA was almost doubling AmeriCorps NCCC numbers in terms of budget and members. That scaling brings challenges for any organization, and from CNCS’ standpoint, there was reluctance out of concern of actually being able to pull this off – they worried if they would be able to market it correctly to have enough applicants to have enough Corps members,” explained Amparo.

“I worked every back-channel, angle, and person I could,” said Amparo. “Before, during, and after group discussions, I would have individual discussions with both FEMA and CNCS people. I used my relationships from CNCS work in Florida and tried to translate effectively between the two agencies.”

“We spent a lot of time negotiating what that joint venture would look like – it was very hard,” remembered Fenton. “Whenever there was an impasse, our team would back-brief Rich on the challenge and share a recommendation and the risks. We would prep Rich to provide top-cover or communication over to his counterpart at CNCS. I had my lower-level staff negotiate and escalate issues, which I would keep Rich informed of. On both sides, we tried to work things at the lowest level, but then would work them up: it made it very easy for the team to know how serious issues or concerns were based on to what level CNCS had escalated the issue in-house.”
“We had meetings between the CNCS Acting CEO and Rich, which I facilitated to make sure their appointed leadership was hearing that this program was an administration priority,” said Amparo. “The White House Domestic Policy Council (DPC) was influencing the business case – they became actively engaged in the process once we had internal buy-in,” explained DeGraff. She added, “I never shared the details with FEMA about the level of the internal CNCS struggles – I didn't want FEMA to lose confidence or pull out.”

**Key Negotiation Topics**

“Every single detail was the subject of a negotiation, whether it was the brand of clothes, cobranding, length of training before deploying, minimum housing standards…every single detail of building an organization that was going to have people flowing through it,” said Kieserman. “There was constant tension between CNCS wanting to protect AmeriCorps and FEMA wanting to grow FEMA Corps,” added Fenton.

**Program Name**

“The White House became actively engaged in our conversations with FEMA,” said DeGraff. “We were on a call going around and around about what to formally call the partnership: do we call it ‘Ameri-FEMA Corps’? Do we call it ‘FEMA Corps’? Do we call it ‘AmeriFEMA’? I remember Jonathan Greenblatt, who served as a Special Assistant to the President and as the Director of the Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation, saying, ‘It’s FEMA Corps. Period. Done.’”

**Funding and Leadership**

“Some of the most intense conversations we had were about funding,” recalled DeGraff. “When CNCS saw that FEMA has access to a never-ending stream of Disaster Relief Funds, they got excited – they saw this as a lifeline given that they were being zeroed-out,” added Kieserman. “It was problematic to figure out the exact cost of each FEMA Corps member,” remembered DeGraff. “We wanted to use AmeriCorps NCCC to take advantage of the existing infrastructure: NCCC already had five campuses, so FEMA Corps members could stay at those campuses. But, because we were using existing infrastructure, it was challenging to figure out the per capita cost of each FEMA Corps member. We weren’t being specific enough for FEMA, which meant that there was a lot of conversation about money.”

“AmeriCorps wanted FEMA to write them a cheque so that they could keep doing what they were doing,” recalled Fenton. “FEMA wanted Corps members to focus on emergency management and professionalize the field. If we just wrote CNCS a cheque, it wouldn't accomplish that goal.” “There was a lot of conversation about the extent of control,” added Kieserman.

DeGraff explained, “It was really important that FEMA Corps work in a new mission space so that Congress wouldn't look at AmeriCorps NCCC funding and FEMA Corps funding and say, ‘Why are we dual-funding the same program with the same purpose?’”
Mission

“There was much consternation about what FEMA Corps members would be doing. It was important to us that we weren’t just recreating the 18-year-old FEMA partnership,” said DeGraff. “We wanted FEMA Corps to extend national service into areas where we had not previously been engaged.”

“It was agreed that FEMA Corps members would still do Service Assignments with AmeriCorps,” said Fenton. “They would work for FEMA Corps for eight or ten hours a day for five or six days a week, and then on their day off they would then go work at a church or some other community organization. This was a concession to have Corps member continue to serve, plus it helped get FEMA’s brand out in the community.”

“CNCS wanted to ensure a meaningful experience for Corps members. Part of the negotiations was to educate CNCS on what FEMA does. FEMA only does two things: it writes cheques and it coordinates. Most people don’t understand that and think that FEMA is boots on the ground coming to muck out houses and rescue people off rooftops, but FEMA doesn’t do any of that. Both the FEMA workforce and the CNCS workforce looked at us and said, ‘What does FEMA really do that 18-year-olds are going to be interested in and that they can do every day of the year to keep them engaged?’” explained Kieserman.

“We wanted to make sure FEMA Corps members were learning how emergency management works,” said Fenton.

“CNCS worried if FEMA would have a consistent flow of work for FEMA Corps members. A major sticking point was, ‘What meaningful work are you going to do FEMA Corps members do between disasters?’ FEMA had to contingency plan, ‘What if we just have public assistance disasters that basically just require writing grants rather than responding to hurricanes?’ FEMA Corps could only do very specific work with very clear objectives because of their very specific funding stream. There’s not that much work FEMA Corps to do with grant administration, writing, and oversight. This made us think about other aspects of how FEMA does business in the field: how would we keep FEMA Corps meaningfully engaged knowing that we are in a business that is unpredictable? We had to convince CNCS and ourselves that we could provide predictability in an unpredictable field – that, if it was a slow season, we would be able to keep FEMA Corps members engaged with things like applicant-focused services in the field. This upset the FEMA workforce, ‘Why are we looking for work when we already have so much work to do?’” recalled Kieserman.

Fugate reflected, “When FEMA Corps was deployed, it was easy – when they weren't, it was a challenge to get the best utilization from them. We couldn't use Disaster Relief Funds for preparedness, but they would have been the best preparedness and community engagement resource to put out there. The restrictions of the Disaster Relief Funds limited the full role FEMA Corps could play, so we were asking, ‘How many people should we recruit?’” Added Serino, “This is a consideration we were prepared for based on my conversations with City Year.”

Recruitment, Training, and Housing

Fugate explained, “We needed to find the right number of Corps members to balance both disaster response roles and blue skies, so what is the optimum number to train and maintain? We only had them for 10 months, unless they re-upped, and if people had a bad experience, that would block future program recruiting.”
“FEMA originally wanted 5,000-8,000 members to be a part of FEMA Corps. CNCS just couldn’t meet that demand. We ended up settling on 1,600 because that was the capacity of the existing CNCS infrastructure and campuses given all of our other programs. That was an early disappointment to FEMA – they had wanted much larger numbers, but, structurally, we just couldn’t do larger numbers. This was also an important lesson learned because even 1,600 was ambitious from a pilot perspective: when you’re first launching a program, sometimes it’s better to start on the smaller end,” reflected DeGraff.

“CNCS wanted a cheque to put more NCCC people in the field, and FEMA wanted to write a cheque and get FEMA Corps people. But AmeriCorps NCCC recruited wide range of individuals who were diverse culturally, educationally, and geographically, which included some individuals that did not meet the minimal requirements to use our systems: FEMA needed people who could pass a background check to have access to Federal government systems and who had specific skills, like Geographic Information System (GIS) capability,” said Fenton.

Gina Cross, who served as the NCCC Director of Policy and Operations, explained, “AmeriCorps NCCC has a statutory requirement to recruit 50 percent of members from disadvantaged circumstances; but FEMA’s high level of security clearance is not dispositioned to support folks coming from disadvantaged circumstances. For example, if someone has high medical debt pending, they may not pass the background check because of the stringent criteria around debt.”

“We very intentionally wanted to recruit a mix of both college and high school graduates,” explained Serino. “We needed to recruit from colleges that offered emergency management and homeland security degrees, but we also wanted urban high school graduates: young people who may not be going to college or are not sure what they want to do, but who like the idea of emergency management. We wanted the program to provide them with role models and a potential career path.”

“The first couple of FEMA Corps classes were taken directly from AmeriCorps pool,” remembered Fugate. “Over time, we got better at recruiting FEMA Corps-like people.”

“We wanted to outsource management, care, and feeding of Corps members to CNCS,” said Fenton. “We met with leaders of each of the five AmeriCorps NCCC campuses to build buy-in and talk at a lower-level. We agreed to upgrade parts of the campuses, like the parking lots and kitchens, which bought goodwill.”

**Uniforms and Logos**

“We explored the possibility of public-private partnerships, where private companies could donate uniforms and other supplies the FEMA Corps teams would need,” remembered Serino. “For example, City Year gets clothing and supplies donated. I learned from City Year how valuable those donations can be, both in terms of saving money and getting the teams the supplies they need, and in terms of getting broader public awareness and support for the program.”

“We had very acrimonious conversations about co-branding, but, in the end, that all came down to trust, marketing, and messaging,” recalled Kieserman.”

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29 Cross, FEMA Corps Interview. All quotes from Cross were gathered during this interview.
“Do they wear AmeriCorps uniforms or FEMA blue? Does the AmeriCorps patch go on the right shoulder or the left shoulder? FEMA wanted one shoulder, and we wanted the same shoulder,” DeGraff recalled the debate. “We knew we reached success when it got down to arguing about logos – we knew we were onto something good.”

*Reaching Agreement*

“Craig and Rich set an aggressive timeline for when the program had to be operational: we needed teams ready for the next hurricane season. That’s what lit the fire for us to have negotiations over the holidays. Rich had the buy-in from his counterpart at CNCS and gave us a timetable that forced both teams to work the issues in just one weekend,” said Fenton.

“We wanted to have the first 480 FEMA Corps boots on the ground by July 2012 and have them ready to deploy by August 1,” said DeGraff.

“It was a long Saturday in December. We were in a room going over the final interagency agreement before hitting the ‘go’ button. We were really spelling out the program line by line, and it got tense. We had to take breaks for internal discussions on both sides,” Fenton remembered.

“There were a lot of issues that came of out the woodwork at the last minute – a lot of reasons were given as to why this wouldn’t work – but the expectation was, ‘No, we’re going to get it done,’” said Fugate.

“On the FEMA side, we now had people adding ideas at the last minute because their leadership had committed to it, which impacted the negotiations because everyone was looking after their brand. We would come back to the table with a new idea for a uniform or a logo, and that would raise hackles,” Fenton recalled.

“We took the SALT lawyering approach,” said Kieserman. “If you can understand what your counterpart is trying to accomplish and are willing to help them, then they will help you – rarely are each party’s needs mutually exclusive in government. Negotiations would have fallen apart if the ‘why’ went away, but Bob Fenton and Bill Carwile defined the ‘why’ in a way that people could understand.” Amparo added, “This was a clear articulation of what we needed to do as an agency to continually improve. It was internalized by everyone on the negotiation team that this program was going to make our agency better.”

“We knew that it was a true compromise because no one walked away with everything they wanted,” said Amparo. Added Fenton, “Ultimately it was a win/win and the black and white document was signed: CNCS finally embraced that it would be ‘FEMA Corps.’ Okay, maybe FEMA owned 51 percent of the pie – but we were the purchaser. After the agreement was signed, CNCS wanted to make the program succeed, but FEMA knew that if it didn't work, we would be forced to design the program in house on our own.”

*The “Four Corners”, OMB, and the DPC*

With agreement on the way ahead, FEMA and CNCS needed approval from OMB, the House and Senate Appropriations Committees (also known as the “HAC/SAC” or the “four corners”), and the White House’s DPC.
“We had a list of all of the people we needed to touch for this thing to succeed,” said Serino. “We knew who we needed to consult and inform and get buy-in from. All of these meetings weren’t by coincidence – we were intentional so that we didn’t miss someone who could kill the program. The HAC/SAC and OMB were worried about cost: how much is this going to cost, where is the money coming from, and is this appropriate use of Disaster Relief Funds? Their initial reaction was, ‘What? You’re going to pay for volunteers?’ We had to explain through business cases that this wasn't altruism: FEMA Corps has real value for FEMA and is critical to mission success. We were very firm about moving ahead with the understanding that Congress was watching closely.”

DeGraff added, “Everyone involved in these conversations wanted to make sure that we were being good stewards of taxpayer dollars – that we were filling a necessary gap, not just a perceived gap.”

“We had to brief multiple folks, multiple programs, multiple levels of government,” said Fugate. “We just kept reminding them that the President thought it was a good idea, and when we played that card, what could they do then?”

**The “Four Corners”: The House and Senate Appropriations Committees**

“When I first went to the Hill, HAC and SAC staffers were quick to point out that there was no appropriation for FEMA Corps,” recalled Serino.

“There were grumblings that we weren’t taking this through normal appropriations process – they were concerned about the deficit. The Freedom Caucus was trying to zero out NCCC, and the last thing they needed was for FEMA to come up with a good idea and get AmeriCorps out in front of people again,” said Fugate.

“I explained that we were pursuing an interagency agreement and that we didn’t need additional appropriations for FEMA Corps. I messaged that, even though I wasn’t required to do so, I wanted to keep them in the loop and practice full budget transparency,” Serino said with a smile.

“We wanted to keep Congress in the loop,” said Fenton. “While we did not require new authority from Congress to establish the program, it was important to ensure Authorizing and Appropriating Committees were included in the early stages. We wanted to keep their support for future years, so we provided routine briefings.” Added Serino, “We brought congressional staffers into FEMA's National Response Coordination Center once a quarter to give them detailed updates on all of our activities. We gave them so much information, they eventually said, ‘Enough! We don’t want to see any more! We get it!’”

“We explained the cost of our current workforce and how FEMA Corps could help us cut those costs; the return on investment we expected; and how FEMA Corps would meet our needs by professionalizing emergency management, filling gaps in the field, and helping to promote a national preparedness culture,” said Fenton. Recalled Serino, “I told the stories of the impact I saw AmeriCorps NCCC members making during disaster responses and how much more of an impact could be made with additional training.”

**The Office of Management and Budget**

“Before Rich got the President’s approval, OMB staff were saying, ‘No way are you doing this,’ but, it’s pretty amazing: once the President says he wants something done, political leadership figures out how to get it done,” said Fugate.
“CNCS and FEMA each have their own OMB examiners,” explained Serino. “The same things that CNCS and FEMA had to negotiate between agencies, the two OMB examiners were negotiating with each other.” Added Fenton, “When they didn’t agree, it was amplified by CNCS and FEMA having two different ideas. We were still working on the marriage.”

Explained Serino, “If you want to get things done in the Federal government, you have to push. With FEMA Corps, we drove things forward: there was no reason the program couldn’t happen other than bureaucracy. It was good to have the President’s support – it was always an ace we could play – but it was more about taking time to build relationships with different folks.”

“The first iteration of business case didn’t have strong enough language to tell a convincing story of the gap we were trying to fill,” recalled DeGraff. “We had to revise the business case and go back to explain that we were trying to build the capacity of the emergency management work force, and while we’re doing that, we wanted to be mindful of having the workforce represent the base of America and all of the different areas of diversity. Then, on behalf of CNCS, this allowed CNCS to provide more opportunities for the youth of America – 18-24-year-olds – to serve their country in a unique way.”

“Both CNCS and FEMA had to sell OMB on the relationship and what the benefits would be. We were looking to double the size of AmeriCorps by adding 1,600 new employees using Disaster Relief Funds – this was in direct conflict with earlier administration conversations about cutting AmeriCorps NCCC to balance the budget. We had to explain how this would help us solve our issues with hiring and that it would broaden emergency management as a profession. They wanted to know why we were making a whole new program and not just using AmeriCorps. We explained how AmeriCorps members are sponsored by people in the community who need their help, like a church. It takes CNCS months to build these relationships, which is untenable for FEMA Corps because we need boots on the ground within hours of a disaster,” said Fenton.

“We also had to explain how this would generate cost-savings. OMB focuses on efficiencies, effectiveness, and accountability; however, the thing OMB cares about is cost and the bottom line. We talked about the cost of FEMA fulltime employees and Reservists versus FEMA Corps, particularly the cost of benefits, per diem, travel, and salary versus the flat fee per person for FEMA Corps,” said Fenton. Added Serino, “Also, unlike with Reservists’ variable costs, which required a lot of administrative oversight, FEMA Corps’ fixed costs meant that the program would not require as much administrative oversight to manage.”

“When the program is at full operational capability, and in an average disaster year, we expect to see a savings of approximately $60 million in a year,” said Fugate.  

*The Domestic Policy Council*

“The DPC was engaged in a healthy manner,” said DeGraff.

Added Serino, “It was no accident that the White House was involved throughout the development process. We knew we needed to keep them informed and that we could call on them when things were stuck. Their priority was making sure the program got off the ground and was aligned with the President’s agenda.”

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Getting Sign-Off

“The business case was approved by the CNCS Acting CEO and the FEMA Administrator on January 13, 2012; and the interagency agreement was signed on March 3, 2012,” said DeGraff. “All of those negotiations felt like years and years, but all took place over the course of months.”

Reflecting on the whole process, Kieserman said, “In the hour after Richie walked out of the White House, the FEMA workforce and CNCS would not have agreed that there was a problem that needed solving – it looked like we had solution in search of a problem. The negotiations were successful by getting buy-in to the problem and senior leadership’s vision: The problem wasn’t just who is going to do preliminary FEMA damage assessments or deliver water to survivors, the problem was, ‘Who is the emergency management workforce going to be in 20 years if we don't do something about it now?’”

“Once we had the agreement signed, the big challenges were then internal in FEMA,” said Fenton.

Change Management

“There were both external and internal change management issues,” said Fenton. “There were passive-aggressive people in both FEMA and CNCS that didn't want FEMA Corps to be executed, which was hard to overcome.”

“We had to do partnership building on all ends,” said DeGraff. “From internal partners to external partners. What we were doing was new and it has the potential to have a cascading effect.”

CNCS Change Management

“I was getting calls from many of our nonprofit partners from the National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD). They demanded answers because they were afraid that a program like this would take away funding from them. A lot of our nonprofit partners were calling their congressmen, so CNCS had to answer to Congress – I was on the Hill constantly with my colleagues briefing representatives on how this would be an asset,” said DeGraff.

“Some Congress members who were strong proponents of AmeriCorps wanted meetings,” remembered Fenton. “CNCS and FEMA would hold briefings in unison. We didn’t get into detail – we talked big picture because we knew that if we went in there an aired our laundry, it wouldn't be good for either of our outcomes.”

“Simultaneously, I was doing lots of town halls across the country,” said DeGraff. “We wanted to give our partners the opportunity to help shape the idea and identify gaps in the disaster space where this program could help. We worked with state and local nonprofits, conservation corps, NVOAD members, and others. Our partners were hesitant, but CNCS and FEMA were committed to earning their trust.”
“We had been doing stakeholder engagement for a while,” said Kieserman. “There was some initial enthusiasm among senior executives, but I think it took a while for people to understand the full value of the idea, in part because AmeriCorps NCCC already existed. A lot of people wondered, ‘Why don’t you just get more AmeriCorps people?’ But we were looking for something focused on FEMA’s needs. As people dug into the anatomy of the project – what it takes to build a corps and what the future could look like – people got interested.”

“We fought an uphill battle with staff that ran disaster operations because the sentiment was that FEMA Corps kids couldn’t help or that they would need to be babysat,” said Fenton.

“We met with union reps,” said Fugate. “There were no real issues there, but Reservists were worried that FEMA was going to replace them with untrained kids as a way to lower labor costs. But FEMA Corps people were well-trained – they had skills that were deployable to disasters that, in many cases, some of the local Reservists didn’t even come close to.” Added Serino, “We had been reaching out to the unions for a while and had calls with them on a regular basis to let them know what was going on. They were really happy to be included, informed, and consulted. But one of the things we didn’t plan for was the amount of pushback we got from our own Reservists and initially some of the Field Coordinating Officers and others internally.”

Said Fenton, “Fulltime staff were concerned about costs increasing because they were worried that they would be babysitting FEMA Corps and still having to deploy same number of trained staff.” Carwile added, “As the first class got together, there was concern from older folks in the Reserve. They were asking, ‘What are we going to do with these young people? I’ve been doing this job for years - what does this kid know about this stuff?’”

“The selling point of the program in FEMA was explaining that it would introduce people to emergency management who otherwise would never see it. If Corps members have a good experience, then they would become an ambassador in their communities, talking about preparedness and what it takes to recover from disasters. They were going to raise the awareness of the general public – these people were going to have different careers other than FEMA, but this would help them be a voice in the community pushing for addressing risk and the needs of vulnerable populations,” said Fugate.

Added Amparo, “Our messaging was, let's have a workforce that's representative of the communities that we serve: multigenerational, not just retirees; with a diversity of perspective, race, and life experience. We want to create career opportunities: no one at FEMA started their career saying, ‘Hey, I want to be an emergency manager.’ The reason why people are signing up for FEMA Corps is the same reason why you signed up for FEMA: to give back.”
Reflected Kieserman, “Whenever the bosses come up with an idea that didn't come from the ground up, generally it meets with some degree of resistance. Success is dependent upon leadership listening and how effective they are at managing change. The listening part is the most important – the workforce will tell you what they think, you just need to listen. Rich had connections all throughout the FEMA workforce. He knew people who were GS-9 in the field somewhere and he knew every senior executive – he basically had a representative sample of the organization on his virtual rolodex. I don’t know where he found time to call all of the people he called and have all of the conversations he had. He had a network that allowed him to get direct feedback from every level of the organization. He would correspond with everyone; he had a listening network and paid attention. Because of that, we were able to address many of the concerns that the workforce surfaced.”

"Looking back, if Richie had not had the opportunity to brief the President and if the President didn't think it was a good idea, there were so many points where this could have been stopped," said Fugate. “Rich put out fires, engaged in months of negotiations – for a lot of people that would have been enough to give up. Rich didn't give up.”

**Inaugural FEMA Corps Cohort – September 2012**

“It was only a 10-month span between the initial memo I wrote to CNCS leadership and when we swore in the first FEMA Corps class,” remembered DeGraff.

On September 13, 2012, FEMA Corps inducted its first class of 231 members in Vicksburg, Mississippi. Two weeks later, on September 28, 2012 an additional 230 members were inducted in Vinton, Iowa, bringing the first cohort to 461 members.

Serino said in his keynote address during the induction ceremony in Vicksburg, “FEMA Corps builds on the great work of AmeriCorps to establish a service cadre dedicated to disaster response and recovery. To be sure, responding to disasters is nothing new for AmeriCorps. In fact, the great work that AmeriCorps already does during disasters was the inspiration for FEMA Corps. When I visited communities all over the country that were devastated by disasters, from Joplin, Missouri to Bastrop, Texas, I always encountered the incredible members of AmeriCorps lending a helping hand to survivors. I was continually struck by the level of compassion, dedication, and skill these members brought to the table. Today’s inductees are pioneers, combining the exceptional record of citizen service at AmeriCorps’ National Civilian Community Corps with FEMA’s specialized mission of supporting survivors with their recovery after a disaster.”

Amelia Rubin, one of the Corps members inducted in Iowa, addressed her class, “According to Merriam Webster Dictionary, a pioneer is: a person or group that originates or helps open up a new line of thought or activity or a new method or technical development. As pioneers forging the road ahead in the new partnership between FEMA and the Corporation for National and Community Service, we have a very special responsibility, gift, and challenge. It is a scary gift, but we have to have faith; in ourselves, our team and unit leaders, and our mission.”

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32 Federal Emergency Management Agency, “Iowa Welcomes 230 FEMA Corps Members as They Begin Ten Months of Service Assisting Disaster Survivors.”
34 Federal Emergency Management Agency, “Iowa Welcomes 230 FEMA Corps Members as They Begin Ten Months of Service Assisting Disaster Survivors.”
“We had hoped that CNCS would recruit for the program at urban high schools and emergency management colleges, but the majority of the first class were standard AmeriCorps applicants,” said Serino.

Shane Snyder-Hawke, who was in the inaugural Vicksburg class and served as a FEMA Corps Team Leader from 2012-2013, remembered, “Most of the people in that first year of FEMA Corps had signed up for AmeriCorps NCCC and were waitlisted, and then offered an opportunity to serve with FEMA Corps. Those folks were expecting to have an AmeriCorps experience of removing debris or doing urban search and rescue -- they were not anticipating working in an office setting. That was a major challenge that first year.”

Added Fugate, “We had some folks in the first few classes who really didn’t understand what they signed up for: they thought they would be parachuting into disasters and administering first aid and digging people out of rubble piles, but that’s really not what FEMA does. But 80 percent of those first few classes excelled more than people expected.”

A few weeks after their induction, a number of FEMA Corps members were deployed for the first time to the Gulf Coast to aid ongoing recovery efforts in the wake of Hurricane Isaac. In Louisiana, FEMA Corps members worked in Disaster Recovery Centers, assessed homes for debris removal, and supported Community Relations Teams to educate survivors about registering for FEMA assistance.

**Superstorm Sandy – October 2012**

In mid-October, shortly before Sandy struck, the Obama Administration nominated Wendy Spencer as the new CEO of CNCS. Prior to her nomination, Spencer had served as the CEO of Volunteer Florida with Alex Amparo as her Commissioner.

“She loved FEMA Corps,” said DeGraff.

“Craig and I were friends with Wendy,” explained Carwile, who had worked in Florida emergency management with Fugate before joining FEMA. “It was great timing that she was at CNCS and we were at FEMA -- we had a shared vision,” Carwile remembered. “It was a series of fortunate events,” added Fugate.

On October 29, 2012, Superstorm Sandy made landfall in southern New Jersey. The storm left 8.5 million customers without power, caused severe fuel shortages in New York and New Jersey, and, “…damaged or destroyed hundreds of thousands of homes, caused tens of billions of dollars in damages, and killed at least 162 people in the United States.” Forty-two FEMA Corps teams were deployed as a part of the response.

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35 Snyder-Hawke, FEMA Corps Interview. All quotes from Snyder-Hawke were gathered during this interview.
37 Ibid.
38 “Corporation for National And Community Service Gets New Boss.”
39 Corporation for National and Community Service, “Senate Confirms Wendy Spencer as CEO of National Service Agency.”
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
Shoveling Sand

“After Sandy hit, there were streets in New York that were just filled with sand up to two-feet high,” recalled DeGraff. “I was in FEMA's National Response Coordination Center (NRCC), and FEMA was saying, ‘We're going to use FEMA Corps members to shovel that sand.’ Craig was demanding it. FEMA wanted to show that FEMA was out there working and getting sand out of the way so that emergency vehicles could get through.”

“I was on the ground in New York and New Jersey forwarding information about what was really going on back to the team at the NRCC,” said Serino.

“We had to be agile and fill immediate needs. The thought was, ‘If we need them to shovel sand, let's have them shovel sand,’” said Amparo. “FEMA underestimated the effort it would take to develop the service the opportunities Corps members needed. We had to be able to find staff to help develop those opportunities, which is hard to do during a disaster.”

“I said, ‘No, we're going to use our other AmeriCorps members to shovel that sand. That kind of debris removal is what our other AmeriCorps members have traditionally done for the past 18 years,’” said DeGraff. “This is exactly what we wanted to avoid when we were establishing the partnership: we wanted to avoid duplication of effort between FEMA Corps and AmeriCorps NCCC. The staffing gap FEMA Corps was supposed to fill was a lack of Reservists. FEMA had lost a lot of DAEs when transitioning to the Reservist model. So, if Reservists could do it, then FEMA Corps could do it; if Reservists wouldn't be asked to do it, then FEMA Corps shouldn't be asked to do it. That was the agreed benchmark.”

“It was a very difficult situation. I knew that if CNCS didn't hold its ground on this one, it would change the whole abstract of how FEMA Corps worked. If we had FEMA Corps out there shoveling sand, this was going to turn the program around and make FEMA Corps duplicative,” said DeGraff. Added Amparo, “CNCS was trying to be cautious about the precedent that was being set. FEMA Corps members could do so much more than shovel sand.”

“Craig called Wendy, and Wendy said, ‘Don’t worry about it, I’ll take care of it,’” recalled DeGraff. “Wendy called me into her office and shared her support for Craig’s position, but she hadn’t been there for the 10 months of negotiations – she wasn’t connecting that this was what we were trying avoid, having this conversation in the first place. This was an important leadership lesson for me because, as I was standing there listening to her, I was thinking, ‘How am I going to manage up and have her see another perspective? That was tough.”

“I knew, to get Wendy and Craig to understand my position, I needed a coalition of my peers – Brad, Bob, and Alex. Rich let us know that he trusted us and that he knew we were going to make the right decision. He let us know that he was there to support us and that he knew we were the right people for the job,” recalled DeGraff.

“Bob, Brad, and I were able to sit down with Wendy and Craig and say, ‘We’ve solved the problem: we have AmeriCorps members out there shoveling just like they would have before FEMA Corps. FEMA Corps members will go door-to-door to alert residents about where to go to register for FEMA assistance,” said DeGraff.
Registering Survivors for Individual Assistance

“We were stationed in Louisiana when we got the call to drive to New York,” remembered Ben Barron, who served as a FEMA Corps Team Leader and now works as a Disaster Survivor Assistance Fulltime Employee Coordinator at FEMA. “We had been working on the paperwork side of the Hurricane Isaac response, so initially there was a lot of excitement to drive halfway across the country to respond to a major catastrophic event and help survivors directly. There were definitely some nerves, too, because our team was trained in the public assistance program, so we were used to doing things like working with local municipalities. Now we were shifting gears and talking to survivors directly. We were paired with a lot of seasoned folks who were able to walk us through program delivery and how to talk to survivors.”

“We were paired with a team who was trained in the Individual Assistance piece,” Barron continued. “For the first couple of days, our team took the lead knocking on doors and handing out flyers telling survivors where the Individual Assistance team was set up so that the survivors could go meet with them to get registered. But then someone realized how we could leverage technology to help people register right where they were, which would be faster. Plus, with iPads, we could not only say, ‘We know this church is providing meals in the evenings,’ but we could also look up directions on Google Maps for how the survivor could get there from where they were.”

“I was driving through checking in on the response progress, and a few FEMA Corps team members came up to me and shared their idea. I immediately got back in my car and called FEMA Headquarters and told them to send 100 tablets for FEMA Corps teams,” Serino remembered. “Luckily, just before Sandy hit, we had ordered iPads for the Agency, and they were just sitting in boxes.”

“We gave them iPads with cellular chips in them so they could register people where they were,” said Fugate. “The state director thought we needed to print more flyers – he didn’t think this was going to work. We were worried that we would have to train everyone on how to use the iPads, but FEMA Corps taught older FEMA employees how to use the tablets because, for them, it just came naturally.”

“Once they had tablets in their hands, they were able to register survivors in a third of the standard time because they eliminated all of the redundancies in the registration process that survivors usually encountered at Disaster Resource Centers or over the phone,” said Serino. Added Fugate, “We had a FEMA app that they used – it was TurboTax® format.”

Explained Barron, “If you’re able to provide that service to someone, that’s one less thing they have to think about. Getting registered became something they could say they got done, and if there was a holdup we could look into peoples’ cases in real-time and edit content. At least they knew that their FEMA application was in, despite all of the other things they had to deal with.”

Barron, FEMA Corps Interview. All quotes from Barron were gathered during this interview.
Barron continued, “As you talk with survivors and ask them about the damage to their home and their immediate needs (like clothing, food, and so on) as a part of the registration process, people start to tell their story. They are mentally unpacking what they just went through with you, which is something they may not have done yet. You could see their stress levels go down, and sometimes people got emotional…it was cathartic for them. We were not mental health experts, but just having human-to-human contact and walking through it was really helpful. We built really good rapport with the community because we had the time to speak with people and because – with the iPads – there was a lot more we could do for the individual survivor.”

“This meant that survivors were able to access transition shelter assistance much faster and could relocate to a hotel room immediately after registration rather than needing to pass through a shelter while their registration was processed,” said Serino. Added Fugate, “This helped make our culture more survivor-centric: Why make people call FEMA when we can go out and register them in the field? The state director ended up really impressed by FEMA Corps’ work.” The team registered 116 survivors.44

“If we had FEMA Corps shoveling sand, we may not have had this innovation,” said DeGraff.

Community Relations-Assess, Inform, and Report (CR-AIR) Missions

“CR-AIR missions involve going out into the community to figure out what the real needs are, and then reporting that data back to the Joint Field Office to inform operations,” said Serino. Added Amparo, “The thought is: we've got folks out in the field with real intel, so let's find a way to use that. Let’s have people assess the situation, gather information, and give that data to people who can make decisions with it. For example, the Joint Field Offices can mobilize resources to provide feeding assistance when they see some trending data that a certain area hasn’t had any stores open for 72 hours.”

“We realized this data gathering was something FEMA Corps members could do. While they were on their mission, FEMA Corps members saw that the Joint Field Offices were using GIS maps to plot all of the data they were getting on paper from the field, which took a long time. FEMA Corps members asked if they could have tablets with the GIS maps loaded onto them so that they could update the data and the maps in real-time,” remembered Serino. “That was great.”

Training Ship Kennedy and Training Ship Empire State

“We had roughly 240 FEMA Corps members staying on the Massachusetts Maritime Training Ship Kennedy because there was no other place to house people,” remembered Serino. “I went to visit them about a week or so into their Sandy deployment just to see how things were going.”

“They were fried – this was really their first deployment,” Serino recalled. “They were getting back late; they were exhausted from working long hours doing hard work. There had been all sorts of discussion about when to feed the Corps members because food was being put out while they were still out working. I spent three hours with them in a small-ish area of the ship just letting them vent and listening. We took every question and suggestion – we wanted them to know that we really heard what they were saying. It was important to set the tone that they could tell us when things weren't good and that we would listen.”

Explained Barron, “Emotions were running high across FEMA Corps teams – there was a lot of uncertainty among Corps members about their mission assignments, FEMA Corps as a program in general, housing on the ships, working directly with survivors…everything was new. We had several conversations with FEMA and AmeriCorps NCCC leadership and the ship captain, and they showed genuine concern for our wellbeing and helped us put the situation in context: where were we going to be housed if not on the ships? We were in a crowded, expensive part of the country responding to an urban disaster, and staying on the ships made sense for getting us as close to our working locations as possible while keeping us safe and fed. And we recognized that survivors were going through a lot worse than we were.”

Remembered Serino, “Another one of the big issues was not being accepted by Reservists or other FEMA staff.”

Said Snyder-Hawke, who served in the Forrest Hills Joint Field Office during Sandy, “Because we were in an active disaster, some FEMA employees didn’t have time to train their teams – they just needed them to jump in. But AmeriCorps NCCC, which built the FEMA Corps teams, did so based on team dynamics. Teams weren’t built based on skillsets, backgrounds, or what was needed for the FEMA mission because the partnership was still new and AmeriCorps NCCC was not familiar with FEMA’s programs, so the teams were of mixed strength.”

Laura Fredell graduated FEMA Corps in 2015, three years after the inaugural class. Reflecting on her FEMA Corps experience, she remembered, “Some FEMA employees did not want to work with us and would not take us seriously. I was once caught in a breakroom and was told to recite the FEMA mission: when I couldn’t say it word-for-word, I was frowned upon for not knowing it. A FEMA employee would not do that to another FEMA employee, but they would do it to FEMA Corps members – they called us kids.”45

Added Dawn Dickerson, who also served three years after the inaugural class as a FEMA Corps Team Leader, “The perception was that we were ‘kids’, not future FEMA employees. I was 34 years-old at the time with professional experience and a Master of Business Administration. The embrace and inclusion of FEMA Corps members by the FEMA workforce was the Agency’s responsibility. This would have ensured that we were a part of the FEMA brand and included in the mission – we were looking to learn about emergency management.”46

“We changed a lot of things about the program just based on feedback from that night, from how they were deployed to the requirement that they be accompanied by a fulltime FEMA person, even when Reservists knew less than they did,” said Serino. “That night was the only time I ever saw them being upset and venting – they were always professional out in the field, so it was important for them to be able to let off steam.”

Added Barron, "Sandy was an adjustment both ways – an education for us as FEMA Corps members and for leadership on how to adapt. The fact that leadership provided us with the bigger picture and addressed the things that were in their control helped us feel like we weren’t in it alone. It was all things you just have to work through: if you decided to have a good attitude and to focus on the good work we were doing, you had a good experience. If you chose to have a negative attitude, you had a bad experience. That was an important learning experience for us.”

Fredell, FEMA Corps Interview. All quotes from Fredell were gathered during this interview.
Dickerson, FEMA Corps Interview. All quotes from Dickerson were gathered during this interview.
“Another important lesson learned from the Kennedy was that we had to add another educational component to their training: three weeks into Sandy, I got a report that there was a venereal disease outbreak on the ship, so we had Public Health come and assist,” said Serino.

“We were constantly solving problems that we didn't anticipate as they were coming up those first few years. There was ‘churn,’ but this is where our emergency management DNA helped: we committed to learning from the past in real-time as part of developing the program,” said Amparo.

“**Wow, That’s a Good Resource**”

“At some point during the Sandy response, I was working housing in New Jersey and really just needed someone to help me. I turned to this FEMA Corps team leader, Ian, and said, ‘Can you find a member who can help me with running tasks and errands? I need someone who is dependable, punctual, and who can be committed to me fulltime starting right now.’ And Ian said, ‘Sir, that's all of us, but if you can give me more specifics, I can find the best person for you.’ It just shocked me. I just thought, ‘Wow, this is the caliber of people that we have.’ I originally discounted the value and the worth that they were bringing us: yes, they were 18-24-year-olds, but some of them were also graduate students…just wow,” remembered Amparo.

“FEMA Corps members are force-multipliers. They help fill gaps and create continuity,” said Dickerson, who currently works as a FEMA Appropriations Liaison. “They’re really committed and give a ton of manhours that we wouldn’t have otherwise. Without them, someone would have to work twice as hard.”

“Watching how well they did, it was like, ‘Wow, that’s a good resource,’” said Fugate.

“**Constantly Asking, ‘Why?’**”

“In FEMA, people don't talk to each other, but FEMA Corps members were living with and talking to each other every day and every night,” said Serino. “They have great situational awareness and understanding of what’s going on, and they ask questions.”

“FEMA Corps members were looking at processes that were set in stone and constantly asking, ‘Why? Why does it have to be done that way?’ They were constantly innovating in the field and bringing to life new ways of doing things,” recalled Amparo.

“They were the best at establishing the relevance of the program,” said Fugate. “FEMA Corps figured out how to get things done. The success of the program had to do with the members themselves proving themselves and their value to skeptical FEMA people.”

“In the end, this was a classic change management opportunity to lead people from reluctance to advocacy. We had young, inexperienced, tech-savvy FEMA Corps members working with experienced, non-tech savvy people, both mentoring each other. And from that, we got a lot of positive feedback from experienced Reservists saying, ‘Please don't take this team away from us, they are helping so much,’” said Amparo.
Lasting Impact

Public Perception of FEMA

“It’s reassuring to the public when young people are going out to help. FEMA Corps really improved the face of FEMA,” said Carwile. Recalled Snyder-Hawke, “Public perception of FEMA following Hurricane Katrina was low and people didn’t seem to trust in a Federal government disaster response. So when they saw 18-24-year-olds in a blue FEMA jacket asking how they could help and providing great resources, it threw people off. That alone has given the Agency a lot of benefit in the public eye.”

Dickerson explained, “FEMA Corps, as a force-multiplier, means that teams can serve a larger portion of the population in need. People say, ‘We see help everywhere.’ Communities really depend on someone knocking on their door after something terrible has happened or interacting with someone representing the Agency at a shelter – FEMA Corps has really helped us to increase our visibility and give people hope for recovery.”

“FEMA Corps members would wear their FEMA Corps uniforms when doing their service assignments in the community,” said Fenton. “That raised brand awareness and improved FEMA’s relationships with communities.”

Said Fugate, “FEMA Corps exposed a lot of people to what FEMA really does. Graduates take that knowledge with them. Most of the public doesn’t know anything about FEMA programs until something goes wrong – FEMA Corps graduates, whatever profession they go into, know what it takes and are another voice in the community helping people understand their risk and get prepared.” Added Fredell, “We have alumni groups around the country that include people from a wide range of organizations, including nonprofits and other government agencies. We try to build on the skills that we learned through the program and provide resources to alumni to use in their FEMA positions or positions outside of the Agency.”

“Before FEMA Corps, I had little knowledge of the Agency’s scope from the Federal perspective and my only point of reference was Hurricane Katrina. Based on the narrative played on radio stations and news outlets, I remembered wondering, ‘Where was FEMA’s support’? It was only once I was in the FEMA Corps program that I learned what FEMA's real utility is – what they’re in the business to do and what their limitations are. It changed my mind entirely about the role of the Federal government when disaster strikes. FEMA does care. I was deployed for my birthday in 2016 and I missed Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Years in 2017 and 2018: my family knows I was out doing important work or otherwise I wouldn't have missed those moments,” said Dickerson. “I tried to start changing the narrative with my own friends and family, explaining what FEMA does.”

“I learned that life in FEMA, and life in general, isn’t all rainbows,” said Michaela Bucca, who graduated from FEMA Corps in 2015 and currently works as an Emergency Medical Technician. “If I hadn't done FEMA Corps, I would be less mature and wouldn't know how to be a good team player. When you’re deployed, you see life events, and you learn how to handle them.”

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47 Bucca, FEMA Corps Interview. All quotes from Bucca were gathered during this interview.
Changing the Composition of the FEMA Workforce

As of October 2019, there are 3,272 FEMA Corps alumni, 623 of whom transitioned to becoming FEMA employees. Forty-nine percent of the current FEMA Corps class has accepted a position FEMA.

Reflected Fenton, “While we never reached the goal of 1,600 FEMA Corps members per year, it has been a very effective program and has led to hundreds of individuals within the program gaining employment within FEMA.”

“We created FEMA Corps Fast-Track Hiring in 2016 to make it easier to bring FEMA Corps members into the Agency,” explained Kristina Grayhek, who served as a FEMA Corps Team Leader and currently works within the FEMA Corps Section of FEMA. “Fast-Track Hiring has nearly tripled the conversion rate of FEMA Corps alumni to FEMA employees.”

Added Kevin Coleman, who also served as a FEMA Corps Team Leader and works within the FEMA Corps Section, “For example, Region 7 has really invested in mentoring FEMA Corps members, doing resume reviews, mock interviews, and providing opportunities for Corps members to shadow FEMA employees in the office.”

“I became the de facto FEMA Corps Liaison in Region 9 when I joined FEMA after FEMA Corps because I was the only alumnuus in the region for a while,” explained Barron. “I spent a lot of time helping new teams understand what the program is all about, how they can navigate FEMA and have conversations about mentorship and learning more about the Agency. One of the things alumni of the program have taken seriously is being able to turn around and provide guidance and perspective to current Corps members because we understand where they’re coming from. We can help Corps members see how they can dovetail their year of service with joining a Federal agency that focuses on helping people.”

“We are trying to build a talent pipeline into emergency management,” explained Casey McCue, who currently serves within the FEMA Corps Section. “We’re trying to recruit people who have a real interest in Federal emergency management and then support their professional development in the emergency management field. We are teaching them the skills they need to be successful, like the incident command structure, office professionalism, and program specific technical knowledge, etc.. We are recruiting people who reflect the population of the country and have the soft skills the Agency needs, like adaptability and interpersonal communication skills (including the ability to work effectively as a team and report effectively within a chain of command).”

“Early in the program, AmeriCorps NCCC handled all of the recruitment. Now, in addition to the efforts of AmeriCorps NCCC, FEMA is taking a role in the recruitment of prospective members. Ideally, if a FEMA field recruiter meets someone who is a good fit for the Agency but lacks field experience, they refer them to FEMA Corps,” said Shelby Hinze, who served as a FEMA Corps Team Leader and currently works within the FEMA Corps Section.

48 “FEMA Corps Conversion Report 2019.”
49 Ibid.
50 Coleman et al., FEMA Corps Interview. All quotes from Coleman et al. were gathered during this interview.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
“FEMA Corps members have become FEMA employees and have at least partially addressed the issues of diversity that we set out to solve,” said Carwile. Explained Fugate, “We started doing tribal-specific FEMA Corps recruiting because we had seen an underrepresentation of tribal members engaged in recovery and response activities. There were many times we went to reservations and we didn’t have a lot of folks who had those experiences, so we really worked with some of the larger tribal nations and recruited for FEMA Corps, and then recruited out of FEMA Corps into FEMA. We are also recruiting young people with technical skills, like GIS or social media, and plugging them into fulltime FEMA staff after graduation. These are very educated people.”

“FEMA Corps helped me understand that emergency management could be a career. I joined the Agency as a Reservist because of all that I had experienced in the program and because of the commitment of the people I met while serving. The austere deployment conditions I experienced with FEMA Corps prepared me for long deployments once I joined the Agency. Additionally, I learned how to stay situationally aware of political overtones so that you know what's going on in the community. FEMA Corps brings people into FEMA who already know the business and can complement what’s going on,” said Dickerson. “FEMA Corps stretches and outlasts the initial investment in each member. We are protecting the future of the Agency by who we train today through the program.”

“I have several FEMA Corps alumni on my staff,” said DeGraff, who currently serves as the Director of Insurance and Mitigation Readiness at FEMA. “They are flexible, they understand urgency, they’re up for any challenge, they think things through, they have grit, and they don't tire easily. I intentionally make entry level positions to fuse FEMA Corps members into my staff: I make positions GS-7 level and know that FEMA Corps alumni will do the work of a GS-14.”

Said Fredell, who currently works as a Program Specialist at FEMA, “FEMA Corps had a huge impact on my career. I would not be where I am today without the FEMA Corps program. I really hope that, as more FEMA Corps members fill leadership positions, it will create a ripple effect through the Agency. We are a change force within FEMA.”

*Changing FEMA Culture*

“I genuinely believe that a reason FEMA has been able to respond to the increasing pace of recent disasters requiring Individual Assistance in the field is because of FEMA Corps,” said Kieserman. “The emergency management community is small, and – because of FEMA Corps – I always know somebody who knows somebody. If I ever need support or assistance, I know I can reach out and get it,” said Fredell.

“FEMA Corps changed the paradigm by thinking outside of the box about how we do business,” said Fenton. “FEMA Corps is a group of likeminded people with fresh ideas that help FEMA innovate and improve its program delivery and who are passionate about serving,” stated Dickerson. Said Fredell, “FEMA Corps just brings a fresh perspective and a willingness to do whatever it takes to get the job done.”
“FEMA Corps brought energy and work ethic and created a culture of mentorship. FEMA Corps added a new voice within FEMA of people who were coming in to do community service, not just come in to do a job. They all share a passion for helping people at their worst possible moment. They are just the most atypical Federal employee you could think of: so full of energy, enthusiastic, not ground-down by the bureaucracy…their enthusiasm is infectious and cannot be tempered – it has motivated burned-out FEMA employees and made everyone feel more energetic,” said Fugate.

“FEMA Corps helped FEMA supervisors become better leaders. FEMA employees who serve as points of contact (POCs) for FEMA Corps teams get new teams every three months that they have to orient, train, and mentor. These leaders get to think through and learn how to bring people onto their staff more efficiently. For anyone looking for leadership and supervisory experience, being a FEMA Corps POC is a great way to gain those skills,” said Snyder-Hawke.

**Postscript**

“We took advantage of timing: the President’s volunteerism push, a series of major disasters, and CNCS needing funding,” reflected Amparo.

“What makes FEMA Corps different from other signature initiatives of appointees is that it's still there. It has survived administration and party transition, it has survived budget turmoil, and it seems to be thriving. Something that was decided in a political space – the Oval Office – has survived beyond and is now baked into FEMA as an organization. In government, if a program isn't providing value, the workforce will shred it, Congress will shred it, or the next administration with shred it, but FEMA Corps has endured, indicating that it was a good idea that continues to appeal to people,” said Kieserman.

“FEMA Corps is a terrific example of building off experience and existing networks of partners. Innovative ideas can stand on the shoulders of programs that are already giants. Innovative ideas don’t have to be brand new – FEMA Corps has showed us that you can take an existing idea or program and build on it. Honestly, that's probably a better way to do it,” said DeGraff. “FEMA Corps changed NCCC and helped redefine what national service can look like and why it's important.” Added Cross, “With FEMA Corps, NCCC has doubled its capacity – we have created more opportunities for people to serve and are now better able to meet more of the communities’ needs faster after a disaster.”

“The first interagency agreement between CNCS and FEMA was updated in 2015 to make the program what it is today. We have focused on creating specialized teams – like GIS, logistics, public assistance, individual assistance and mass care, and planning teams – that allow the FEMA Corps members to really learn a skill and come up with new ideas,” said Fenton.

“I saw FEMA Corps members responding to the Flint water crisis when I was there with the Red Cross,” said Kieserman, who currently serves as the Vice President for Disaster Operations and Logistics at the American Red Cross. “They excitedly told me all about the program and the career decisions they were going to make based on their experience. It was amazing to see young human beings helping older human beings survive a disaster that never should have happened.”
Amparo added, “I met a FEMA Corps team in Puerto Rico that was demobilizing after serving for the past few months on Hurricane Maria recovery efforts. We did a beach cleanup together: they had worked in our operations centers and were volunteering in their off time. It was an emotional moment for me, seeing these young citizens starting off the right way. I knew that this had impacted their lives.”

Said Serino, “Almost everywhere I've gone and said that I helped develop FEMA Corps, someone has come up to me and shared that they were or their family member was in FEMA Corps. We now have alumni doing all sorts of things around the country unrelated to FEMA Corps, but they credit FEMA Corps with getting them to where they are today. It has been powerful to hear how FEMA Corps has changed the lives of current and former members, as well as transformed survivors’ lives and how FEMA operates as an agency. FEMA couldn’t operate today without FEMA Corps. Of course, this was our vision the whole time, but to hear that our vision is now reality is one of the most satisfying things I have ever done. It took hard work, many forms of leadership, and vision, but at the same time it was common sense. I think it’s a great representation of Margaret Mead’s famous saying, ‘Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world.’”

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53 “Margaret Mead: The Making of an American Icon.”
References

Amparo, Alex. FEMA Corps Interview. Phone, December 3, 2019.


Carwile, William. FEMA Corps Interview. Phone, October 18, 2019.


DeGraff, Kelly. FEMA Corps Interview. Phone, October 22, 2019.

Dickerson, Dawn. FEMA Corps Interview. Phone, July 31, 2019.


## Appendix I: Who’s Who

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position(s) As Indicated in Case Study</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex Amparo</td>
<td>Former Commissioner for Volunteer Florida</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Former FEMA Deputy Assistant Administrator for Recovery</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ben Barron</td>
<td>Former: FEMA Corps Team Leader</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Current: FEMA Disaster Survivor Assistance Fulltime Employee Coordinator</td>
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<tr>
<td>Michaela Bucca</td>
<td>Former: FEMA Corps Member</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Current: Emergency Medical Technician</td>
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<tr>
<td>William (Bill) Carwile</td>
<td>Former FEMA Associate Administrator for Response and Recovery</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kevin Coleman</td>
<td>Former: FEMA Corps Team Leader</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Current: FEMA Corps Section member</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gina Cross</td>
<td>Former NCCC Director of Policy and Operations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kelly DeGraff</td>
<td>Former: Director of Disaster Service and as a Senior Advisor to the CEO of CNCS</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Current: FEMA Director of Insurance and Mitigation Readiness</td>
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<td>Dawn Dickerson</td>
<td>Former: FEMA Corps Team Leader</td>
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<td>Former: FEMA Reservist</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Current: FEMA Appropriations Liaison</td>
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<td>Robert (Bob) Fenton</td>
<td>Former FEMA Acting Deputy Assistant Administrator for Response</td>
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<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Position(s) As Indicated in Case Study</td>
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<tr>
<td>Laura Fredell</td>
<td>Former: FEMA Corps Member</td>
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<td>Current: FEMA Program Specialist</td>
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<td>Craig Fugate</td>
<td>Former FEMA Administrator</td>
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<td>Kristina Grayhek</td>
<td>Former: FEMA Corps Team Leader</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Current: FEMA Corps Section member</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shelby Hinze</td>
<td>Former: FEMA Corps Team Leader</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Current: FEMA Corps Section member</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brad Kieserman</td>
<td>Former: FEMA Chief Counsel</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Current: Vice President for Disaster Operations and Logistics at the American Red Cross</td>
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<tr>
<td>Casey McCue</td>
<td>FEMA Corps Section member</td>
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<tr>
<td>Richard (Rich) Serino</td>
<td>Former FEMA Deputy Administrator</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shane Snyder-Hawke</td>
<td>Former FEMA Corps Team Leader</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wendy Spencer</td>
<td>Former Volunteer Florida CEO</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Former CNCS CEO</td>
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Meta-Leadership in Practice

Meta-Leadership is a guide for solving complex problems involving numerous stakeholders. The “Meta” prefix describes an overarching grasp of problems as well as a broad perspective on potential solutions. Organizations are now less hierarchical and more oriented toward inter-dependence with other entities: an enterprise view of what they do. Therefore, successful leaders must expand their thinking, influence and activity beyond the formal bounds of their authority. The definition and metric of Meta-Leadership is “People Follow You.” Those people include a boss, peers, outsiders as well as subordinates.

There are three dimensions of Meta-Leadership, which combine when put into practice:

The Person of the Meta-Leader
Meta-Leaders are grounded in who they are and why they are leading. Exhibiting emotional intelligence—self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills—their authenticity rallies those who follow. In stressful times, they are able to get up and out of the “basement,” the primal survival fear instincts of their brain that otherwise overcome rational decisions and actions. They foster this discipline and balance in themselves and others.

The Situation
Step one in solving a problem is in understanding it. What is happening? The “Meta” view encourages a far-reaching analytic lens, recognizing the different experiences and motives of the many involved stakeholders. Building solutions requires development of options, engagement of key parties and negotiation of mutually acceptable and feasible solutions. The Meta-Leader guides strategic integration of differing perspectives, recognizing that by their very nature, situations continuously evolve.

Connectivity
Meta-Leaders intentionally link and leverage the efforts of many different organizations and people. By proactively galvanizing knowledge, motivations, and capabilities, they forge invaluable unity of effort and initiative. This connectivity includes leading DOWN to subordinates; leading UP to bosses or reporting authorities; leading ACROSS within one’s organization; and leading BEYOND to those outside the organization. The result is a collaboration that coalesces key stakeholders who are together able to accomplish outcomes that none could reach alone.

Authors
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Barry C. Dorn, M.D., M.H.C.M.
Eric J. McNulty, M.A.
Joseph Henderson, M.P.A.
Appendix III: FEMA Corps Flyer

What is FEMA Corps?
AmeriCorps NCCC-FEMA Corps is a full-time, team-based, residential service program for 18-24 year old young adults (no upper age limit for Team Leaders) who want to serve their country for 12 consecutive months.

Why should I serve?
As a FEMA Corps member, you’ll have the chance to develop leadership skills, travel the country, gain life experience, and strengthen communities through your service while supporting FEMA. You’ll receive technical training, full room and board, health care benefits, and a living allowance. Upon completion of the program, you’ll also be eligible to receive an education award of nearly $6000* that can be used towards future tuition or qualified federal student loans.

Where will I serve?
As a FEMA Corps member, you will be sent to one of our AmeriCorps NCCC campuses to complete an initial training period before being deployed on your first project. During your 12 months of service, you and your team will serve on a variety of service projects in communities throughout the United States!

*Check AmeriCorps.gov/NCCC for updated amounts.
SIGN UP AND MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

Now is the time to submit your application to serve as a FEMA Corps member!

Are you interested in a career in emergency management or are you just looking for a chance to travel while serving your country? No matter what your story is, this service opportunity could be your next chapter.

There are several times throughout the year that you can apply. Visit AmeriCorps.gov/FEMACorps for more information about our application timelines, available opportunities, how to apply, and what to expect throughout the application process.

Contact us at ANCCC@cnns.gov or 1-800-842-2877 if you need help.

SERVE. PREPARE. RESPOND.

Throughout your 12-month term, you’ll complete 1,700 hours of service, including 10 hours of independent service projects in disaster preparation, response, and recovery work.

When you arrive at your assigned campus, you’ll receive training that prepares you for your service term and teaches you about our culture, procedures, and policies. FEMA will also provide specific incident management training that you’ll utilize during disasters. Once you take the AmeriCorps pledge, you’ll be inducted into the Corps and deployed to your first project!

You will be sent on multiple deployments throughout your service, each taking you to somewhere new in the country to serve a community that needs your help. You could train the public on disaster preparedness, register survivors for financial assistance, plan evacuation routes, prepare disaster kits, track and manage inventory in FEMA warehouses, or serve your country in a variety of other ways.

FEMA Corps members are always getting things done!

LAUNCH A CAREER IN EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT.

Once you complete a full service term with FEMA Corps, there are many different paths you can take. Whether you’re using your education award to pay for student loans or future tuition, or you’re using this experience to expand your skill set, serving with us opens many doors.

FEMA isn’t the only organization looking to hire FEMA Corps alumni. Visit NationalService.gov/Employers for information about how over 500 Employers of National Service have signed on and pledged to recruit AmeriCorps alumni, made up of over 1 million Americans, for their skills and experience.

READY TO APPLY?
VISIT AMERICORPS.GOV/FEMACORPS